The Premier’s Reading Challenge

Premier, Minister, Readers all.

Unfortunately I forgot to bring my favourite book with me today. It is Toni Morrison’s novel, Beloved, a wonderful work. I thought I knew something about American history and slavery but this book opened my eyes and told me that I had known nothing.

As a writer I sat on the Committee that drew up that huge list of books which you draw on for the Premier’s Reading Challenge.

But one thing I also am is a reader. My writing I do from a deep deep sense of pleasure – but it’s also very difficult and at times takes great discipline and perseverance. My reading I do for the deep deep pleasure alone. And like many Australian, many people world wide, I am in a reading group. I meet with friends share a drink and a catch up gossip and then talk books.

It is wonderful to be with you today to celebrate what I think of as the biggest reading group in the world. None of us, when we drew up the list, could have imagined that these would be the numbers to celebrate today. Congratulations. And I imagine that amongst you there have been conversations about books, recommendations about books, questions about meaning in books, and maybe even a comment of ‘don’t bother with that one. I didn’t like that.’

Because you don’t have to like them all. We worked hard to find you books of every kind. Books you couldn’t put down. Books that were fun. Books to expand your mind. Books to blow your mind. Demanding, complex novels to challenge the most competent reader, science fiction, fantasy, fascinating works of non fiction to intrigue you, picture books with limited written text so you had to read the pictures as well as the word for ours is an age of visual literacy as well as that of the written word.
We wanted you to have access to the range: books to leave you gasping, weak at the knees, books to reassure an anxious heart, books to console you, books to make you angry at injustice, books to make you smile and belly laugh books that make you gulp and weep. All of human knowledge and feeling is there, in books and it’s yours for the taking.

You know ten years ago with advancing technology, new generation computers, palm pilots there were those who said the book was dead. Well news of that death were grossly exaggerated.

More books are being published and read in homes and schools and all over the world there are projects for Reader Development. Whether it be Britain’s Book Day, Canada’s Get Caught Reading project or the Australian Centre for Youth Literature in Melbourne, Books, reading, literacy, literature in it’s broadest definition is rightly seen as the way forward for any sophisticated, clever community.

And this, the Premier’s reading challenge is up there with them. May it continue to grow, bringing more books and reading to more and more people.

Books are powerful because knowing is powerful. Dictators know this – they burn books and shoot writers.

CSLewis said – Through literature ‘I become a thousand people and yet remain myself’ Through books you know. You know people. You can listen to the voice of someone who lives or lived in another time and another place. People who discovered or created who celebrated or who suffered.

Paul Jennings, who I’m sure you all know, put it more simply – I don’t bash people up because I read books – I know what it’s like to be other.

And isn’t knowing and understanding each other our most important human attribute.
We are a nation that celebrates our gold medal sport people. Today it’s a pleasure to celebrate here our gold medal readers. My warmest congratulations to you all.